

2020-08-09-Patacara and Poetry of the Early Nuns

Sun, 8/9 10:33AM • 26:25

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

nuns, enlightenment, poems, attained, poetry, enlightened, text, lived, Patacara, Therīgāthā, buddha, early, women, called, verses, peace, freedom, practice, life, fried

SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So, as many of you know, I have behind me here, the statue of Patacara, the one of the very important early nuns. One of the very important early nuns who was a disciple of the Buddha. And she is particularly important because the evidence that we have is that she was probably the most important of the nuns who was a teacher. She ordained other women to become nuns. She supported them, she urged them on to awakening. And she taught them and some of them express their tremendous gratitude for her.

So not only do we have one of the here on our altar today the exemplar of early Buddhist, enlightened women, but also a woman who was a teacher for other nuns and preeminent teacher in her own right. In the ancient texts, they says she was also a master of the Vinaya. She was foremost in understanding the monastic rules their way of life of the monastics of the nuns. What we know most about her so today I want to talk about her some and talk about these early nuns. Kind of as a great appreciation for these important pioneers of Buddhism, who really can help lay down the foundation for all the Buddhism that followed.

And the primary information we have it comes from a canonical text early sacred text That's in the canon of early Buddhism. And that text is called the Therīgāthā, gāthā means verse and therī is a literally means the elder. It's an honorific title for a senior elder, Buddhist nun elder monk is called a Thera so Thera and Theri's are these respectful titles for generally someone who has been a monastic for a long time, but also someone who's become enlightened. And so there's a anthology of poems having to do by these by these early Buddhist nuns, It's often said that there they are poems by the early Buddhist nuns, and that could well be but as we go through, if you went through that books, you'll see that it's not always so clear, you know, who the author is or who the speaker is, and

sometimes it's clearly not one of the nuns who speaking in the, some of the poems or conversations back and forth.

And this text, the verses of the early Buddhist nuns is a remarkable text because it's the, for many reasons. It's also the earliest anthology of women's poetry that has survived or that exists in the present. So it's a very early anthology of poetry. And, but it's a very unique poetry, because it's the poetry of awakening of enlightenment. And one of the strong features of this poetry is that these are enlightened women, women who be who are or become enlightened and they express their enlightenment with great confidence and great strength. It's unequivocal that they are now taking their place in the in the community of enlightened Buddhists and practitioners, and they're in ancient texts, making this the statement that one is now enlightened is called a lion's roar. And they never refer to that term in the poetry. But it gives you a little bit of sense of the confidence or the strength with which they would take their place and say, you know, I am fully enlightened. They had there's about 40 different ways they say that then the texts, all the different synonyms for awakening enlightenment. And it's in this text, the Therīgāthā that we find the most information about Patacara, until many centuries later when there were commentaries written. And the commentaries tell lots of stories. And whether those stories are accurate of what happened in the time of the Buddha, we don't know because they're a little bit fantastical some of these stories and so they have more of a quality of myth and they have of, of, you know, historical record or something. And so first I want to say a little bit about more about this book of the book of verses by the nuns, and then read a little bit of some of them, including the verses having to do with Patacara.

And the ancient poetry in India often had moods, often called the rasa or flavor. And the mood as I translated these texts, the whole book, I translated it, and so I spent a lot of time living in it, being with these verses of the nuns. And I would say that, for me, at least, that there were three predominant moods of this poetry. One was or is a lot of warmth. There's a warm feeling sometimes between the nuns and very clear that the nuns are living in communities. They support each other. And that they value each other's as teachers, as supporters and all that. And so there's a sense of warmth that comes across in these texts. The other mood is the confidence. I mean, these are confident women, they are not only in stating their enlightenment, but in really practicing and facing some of some of the nuns facing tremendous challenges they had. You could feel that they're facing this in a strong, upright, dignified, powerful way. And you that you get a sense of these women, these women are not subjugated to anyone. They are independent, strong women, and they're not going to, you know, be less than any, any men certainly. And that's a remarkable thing given how much probably women were subjugated to men in Ancient India, these nuns, they are not part of that. They are stepping into an independent life, an autonomous life, very powerful life, where they stand strong for themselves. That's what you get, you get this mood of that confidence in the text. The other the other mood is I got picked up from the text is one of peace. That there is a sense of peaceful tranquility that comes with their enlightenment. Some of them were in turmoil coming to practice before becoming a nun. And you get a sense of that turmoil and in the text, but that comes to a place of peace. And one of them says she walks in now she now walks in peace. And now lives in the safety of peace. Kind of all these

references to peace and tranquility comes across comes across. But as I said the project and a theme is that these women become enlightened with confidence. And they don't they're not shy about talking how enlightened they are. In fact, they, they, there's a particular way that the Enlightenment is described full enlightenment described, that generally in the early texts, it's only the Buddha talks about him this way, and that he is he has attained three knowledges. And, and more than any other early texts, these nuns claim we have attained I have attained the triple knowledge, just like the Buddha. In other words, they're not even going to I don't know if there's bright languages, but they are holding themselves. I don't know if they would say they would say equal to the Buddha, but they're certainly holding their enlightenment, as as equal to the Buddha or it this is not a second rate level of enlightenment. This is you know, full enlightenment that there is confidently stating that they have these nuns come from all kinds of walks of life. Some are old, some are young, some of them are mothers and wives or had been mothers and wives a good number of them are widows, a lot of them lost their children. At first a lot of them It seems that the death in their family death or their children death or their whole family was a big catalyst for becoming a nun and doing practice somewhere prostitutes or corazones. Some were wealthy, some were poor, you find a whole range of different backgrounds that are being discussed to presented in this in this, this this body of poetry and to read a few of them to you these poems and then we'll get to Patacara.

I said that they is a lot of emphasis on community or the women supporting each other and you have this in some explicit in some of the, some of the poems. The first chapter has something like 23 poems or one verse poems, and that most of the poems involve a wordplay with the name of the nun has a meaning. And so, they play with that or they utilize that double meaning in the poem itself.

And these, these first chapter is one that I feel have the most warmth and kind of tenderness to them. And most of the poems is someone speaking to the nun. So, this poem here is to the nun Mitta, Mitta is a means friend, so, that's her name. And so someone's talking to her and says, Mitta having gone forth out of faith, delight in friends. By cultivating skillful states, attain peace from bondage. So, or safety from bondage. So, delight in friends is one nun tells tells another and here's another one. And it refers to the Buddha he's called the sage but there's none as talking to other nuns. To this world, the sage has taught and praised noble friendship. By associating with a noble friend, even a fool can become wise. Associate with good people, and ones wisdom will grow. By associating with good people, one will be freed from all suffering.

So this idea of community and practicing with people and associating with people who are practicing are good people for the purpose of becoming free of suffering.

So some of these one verse poems at the beginning of the book there's a woman whose name is Dhīrā remains wise. Dhīrā touch cessation, the happy stilling of concepts, become pleased with freedom, the unsurpassed peace from bondage.

Here's one somewhat famous one it's her name is freed, in English Muttā in Pali, but it means freed and the one who is free. And this one she's she's talking, and she exclaims, I put exclamation marks in my translation. Well freed, very well freed. I am freed from three crooked things, mortar, pestle, and my crooked husband. I am freed from birth and death, which leads to becoming has been pulled out. Some people like this poem a lot because they think the idea of maybe an oppressive life that she lived and maybe very limited with a husband who was not kind or supportive or was kind of crooked in some way. And the toil of mortar and pestle and being free from that kind of life. Maybe that maybe was, you know, not a good place for her to live.

So, a good number of the nuns are old and this one is a one verse poem that's being spoken to a old nun and it goes this way. Old One, be at ease, wrapped in the robe you made for your passion is stilled, you become calmed, freed. Hold one be at ease wrapped in the robe you made for your passion is still to become calmed released.

So, I'll get to Patacara.

Here's one. Here's another poem that talks about how one nuns supports another one. And it talks about the challenges that they had. Some of them practice some of the practice for many, many years as nuns and never attained any peace. So it's not like an easy process to be to attain enlightenment. But here's one. Her name is Uttamā, which means most excellent. Not attaining mental peace, and with no control of my mind. For five times, I left my meditation hut. I approached a nun who was trustworthy. She taught me the dhamma, the aggregates and bases and elements. I listened to the dhamma as she instructed me for one week. For one week, I sat cross legged in one spot filled with joy and happiness. On the eighth day, I straightened out my legs and shattered the mass of darkness. The mass of darkness shattering the mess of darkness is another way to talk about becoming enlightened. And it's kind of a metaphor, maybe the primary one is shattering that darkness of ignorance and kind of waking up and understanding clearly. And I like to think of it also as shattering, the darkness of the ignorance this societal ignorance that these women had to live with, where they were oppressed and treated sometimes as servants of their husbands and had to work hard and were often discriminate mean often were probably commonly discriminated in ways that we would be horrified if we if we kind of could see what what their lives were like back then. And The some of them were, you know, these challenges of being married off by their parents and then not wanting to be married and, and wanting to be ordained instead. It's really it was one of the only ways very few ways a woman can be independent in the ancient world was to become a nun. So it has a very different meaning. Maybe the idea of ordination as a nun back then that it would do today, where it's easier to be autonomous and independent woman that was back then. So this was a you know, it was a real big step and stepping out of society in this way.

So let me see if I can find the Patacara poems. There's one poem that's a poem of her enlightenment. And it goes like this Why is it that I though virtuous and conduct, doing the Buddhist instruction, not

lazy, you're proud have not attained freedom. Having said so she's wondering, you know, she's done lots of practice. She's engaged in the practice, but somehow nothing hasn't worked. She has an attained to free liberation. So that's the context of what happens next. Sitting having washed my feet, I watched the water, the foot washing water, flow from high ground to low. So she's poured the water over feet to clean them, and then the water's flowing down hill a little bit and she's watching the trickle the flow of water go then I concentrated the mind. We became like a wonderful thoroughbred horse. So I think that you know, she got concentrate a little bit watching the water flow like watching a river and getting getting absorbed and just watching the water moving water. And with that concentrated mind she got even more concentrated and like a wonderful thoroughbred horse. Then taking a lamp, I entered my hut. Looking over the bed, I sat down on the bed taking a needle, I pulled out the wick from the oil lamp just like the going out to the lamps flame. So was the liberation of the mind. So she got concentrated, and sometimes the mind is very still in very concentrated. It can kind of be a kind of follow something and kind of With a trip with a when something could changes dramatically, something in the mind can let go of. So she was very, very focused and very still and calm in her mind. And she was probably not thinking too much of anything else, which is really there with taking the wig to turn off the light to pull the wick out of the oil. And with that, everything got dark. And something about that transition to darkness or the snuffing of the lamp of the light, helped something release in her mind. It's partly a metaphor because the word Nibbana Nirvana also means the extinguishing of a flame. So that was her enlightenment poem, and a metaphor because the Enlightenment from but there's another poem here that contains some of her verses where she's talking with about the challenges he lived under, and before she became a nun. And this is these stories built up in almost mythic stories. You know about how this came to be. But, you know, she had a life of tragedy. And some people's tragic tragic lives are huge. One tragedy after the other. And her tragedy was, was the death of her family. So she says, walking around, about to give birth. I found my husband dead. Before I reached my house, I gave birth on the road for miserable me, two children died. A husband dead on the road. And mother, father and brother burning on one funeral pyre. They all died at the Same time. And then, in the wake of all this death, things were not good for her. She had a lot of grief, a lot of despair. She, you know, she lost her everything she had and, and she lived for quite a while in a charnel ground apparently charnel ground where her children had been placed. I lived in the middle of a charnel ground she wrote, where my children's bodies were laid. With family killed, I was despised by all. But then with husband dead, I attained the deathless. I cultivated the Noble Eightfold Path, leading to the deathless, I have realized freedom and having looked into the mirror of the Dhamma, I have removed the arrow, lay down the burden and done what had to be done. Remove the arrow that causes suffering in the heart, the cause of suffering.

So the contrast here to put a contrast is she emphasizes how much death she's experienced. And then her for her, she talks about her enlightenment as having attained the deathless. So the death and deathless and then having done what had to be done, becoming free. And so this is a possibility for all of us, that no matter what our circumstances, whether we're young or old or poor, rich that these example of these nuns is a really a wonderful inspiration, a call a kind of, I like to think of it maybe as a call to practice that yes, it is possible to become awake to become free. And this poetry is a real test.

To this idea that yes, it is possible. Sometimes it takes 25 years of practice as well as it is for one of these nuns, sometimes it seemed to happen very, very easily and very quickly in seven days or even faster for some of these nuns, but regardless how long it takes, being on the path of liberation is worthwhile. Being on the path of liberation is a path that's worth being on, and the attainment of this phenomenal spiritual freedom, release safety, peace, tranquility is one of the great possibilities of any human life.

And we have this wonderful text that testament to these nuns having done that, in practice that and we have Patacara now on the altar here, that also is a represents this possibility for all of us to be this way and live this way with this kind of dignity and freedom. I had hoped that this We would have Patacara here for a few months. But because the wood is new and it's still kind of settling, they call, it they became a little crack on the base. And so we're going to take it to where it's intended home is down in Santa Cruz at our retreat center where the air is more humid and we think that'll kind of keep it nice and supportive and let it kind of dry more slowly than it can here in the hot and dry Redwood City.

So again, if for some of you would like to meet with Tanya, who helped make this possible this stau and talk about these verses or something, some some aspect of this talk today or just meet each other. You could go to the community meeting that's on zoom right after I finish here and probably about 10 minutes kind of warming up the people chance to get there and then in about 10 minutes, then there's a half an hour meeting for with with Tanya.

So thank you so much and may you all be well and safe and peaceful.